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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 003820

PARIS FOR LEAF
NICOSIA FOR ERDMAN

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SUBJECT: LEBANESE PARLIAMENT ELECTS ARMY COMMANDER EMILE
LAHUD AS PRESIDENT

REFS: A) STATE 190962 B) DAMASCUS 6387

11. (U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR DAVID M. SATTERFIELD.
REASONS 1.5 (B AND D).

12. (C) SUMMARY: RATIFYING THE NAME WHICH EMERGED FROM LAST WEEK'S SUMMIT BETWEEN LEBANESE PRESIDENT HRAWI AND SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASAD, THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT TODAY ELECTED LAF COMMANDER EMILE LAHUD AS LEBANON'S ELEVENTH PRESIDENT BY A QUASI-UNANIMOUS VOTE OF 118 (AND 10 ABSTENTIONS). WHILE UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES NO PRESIDENT COULD BE CHOSEN WITHOUT DAMASCUS' BLESSING, LAHUD APPEARS TO BE A GENUINE NATIONAL CONSENSUS CANDIDATE -- WITH MOST LEBANESE TAKING HOPE FROM LAHUD'S REPUTATION AS THE CORRUPTION-FREE REBUILDER OF A DECONFESSIONALIZED NATIONAL ARMY AND ABOVE ALL, A LEADER FROM OUTSIDE THE LARGELY DISCREDITED POLITICAL CLASS. WITH MONTHS OF FEVERED SPECULATION OVER THE IDENTITY OF THEIR NEXT PRESIDENT NOW ENDED, AN EQUALLY INTENSE FOCUS WILL NOW TURN ON LAHUD'S POLITICAL PROGRAM AND THE COMPOSITION OF THE NEXT GOVERNMENT. LAHUD AND HIS SOON-TO-BE COLLEAGUES IN THE TRIPARTITE PRESIDENCY, PM HARIRI AND SPEAKER BERRI, WILL UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE THEIR OWN IDEAS ABOUT THE NEW GOVERNMENT SHOULD RUN -- AS WILL DAMASCUS. EXPECTATIONS OF POSITIVE CHANGE ARE RUNNING HIGH HERE, AS IS SKEPTICISM OVER WHETHER ANY OF THE PARTIES CONCERNED TRULY WANT TO SEE SUCH CHANGE TAKE PLACE. OUR CONTINUED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPHASIS ON STRENGTHENING LEBANON'S INSTITUTIONS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE WILL BE IMPORTANT, BUT WHETHER LEBANESE (AND OUR OWN) HOPES WILL BE FULFILLED REMAINS VERY MUCH TO BE SEEN. END SUMMARY.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY (IN DAMASCUS) MAKES

13. (C) MONTHS OF INTENSE SPECULATION AMONG LEBANON'S POLITICAL ELITES REGARDING THE IDENTITY OF THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC WERE ENDED WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT LATE ON OCTOBER 5 -- FOLLOWING PRESIDENT HRAWI'S SUMMIT WITH SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASAD -- THAT ARTICLE 49 OF THE LEBANESE CONSTITUTION WAS TO BE AMENDED TO PERMIT SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS (LAF COMMANDING GENERAL EMILE LAHUD, FOR EXAMPLE) TO BE ELECTED PRESIDENT. WHILE HRAWI CERTAINLY WAS SEEKING ASAD'S APPROVAL FOR AN AMENDMENT TO ARTICLE 49, IN HIS CASE TO PERMIT ANOTHER EXTENSION IN OFFICE, THE GENERAL CAME AWAY THE WINNER.

14. (C) COMMENT: ARTICLE 49 WAS ADDED AT THE TIME OF THE TAIF ACCORD TO PRECLUDE THE POSSIBLE CANDIDACY OF THEN (REBEL) LAF COMMANDER LTG MICHEL AOUN. IRONICALLY, TODAY'S VOTE COINCIDED WITH THE ANNIVERSARY OF AOUN'S FORCED DEPARTURE FROM LEBANON'S PRESIDENTIAL PALACE AT THE HANDS OF THE SYRIAN MILITARY AND THEIR LEBANESE ALLIES (EN ROUTE TO ULTIMATE EXILE IN FRANCE) ON 13 OCTOBER 1990. AOUN TOLD THE PRESS IN PARIS THAT HE IS PREPARED TO RETURN TO LEBANON SHOULD LAHUD MAKE THE REQUEST -- AN UNLIKELY SCENARIO. END COMMENT.

15. (C) ACTING IN RECORD TIME AND WITH A VIGOR USUALLY UNKNOWN HERE, PRESIDENT HRAWI AND THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS PROMPTLY SENT TO THE PARLIAMENT THE REQUISITE AMENDMENT OF ARTICLE 49 WHICH WOULD PERMIT "FOR ONE TIME ONLY" AND ON AN

EXCEPTIONAL BASIS THE CANDIDACY OF A SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT. MP BOUTROS HARB, A MEMBER OF THE JUDICIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT AND A DECLARED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, VOTED AGAINST THE AMENDMENT IN COMMITTEE. LEGAL ANALYSTS, INCLUDING A MEMBER OF LEBANON'S CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL, TOLD EMBOFFS THAT THE DEBATE CENTERED ON WHETHER THE ONE-TIME EXCEPTION CLAUSE PROPOSED BY HRAWI WAS SUFFICIENT TO NULLIFY THE REQUIREMENT, EMBODIED IN LEBANESE ELECTORAL LAW, THAT THE CANDIDATE MUST HAVE BEEN OUT OF ACTIVE MILITARY DUTY FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS. SINCE THE AMENDMENT WAS NOT SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL, THE POINT BECAME MOOT (ASSUMING THAT, UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, CONSTITUTIONAL SUBSTANCE AS OPPOSED TO FORM WAS EVER AT ISSUE) WHEN THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE APPROVED IT ON 12 OCTOBER.

16. (U) ON 14 OCTOBER THE FULL PARLIAMENT PASSED THE AMENDMENT BY A VOTE OF 113 TO 4 AGAINST (WITH 11 ABSTENTIONS -- COMPRISED MOSTLY OF DRUZE LEADER WALID JUMBLATT'S PROGRESSIVE SOCIALIST PARTY AND ITS ALLIES). FORMER PRIME MINISTER, MP OMAR KARAME, CONTINUED HIS TWO-YEAR BOYCOTT OF PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS AND REFUSED TO ATTEND THE SESSION DESPITE HIS PERSONAL SUPPORT FOR GENERAL LAHUD. (COMMENT: THE HASTY AMENDMENT PROCESS DID HAVE ONE POSITIVE OUTCOME: IT BROUGHT PM HARIRI AND SPEAKER BERRI TO TALK WITH EACH OTHER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY MONTHS. THE UNVEILING OF A STATUE OF LEBANON'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER AND INDEPENDENCE HERO, RIYAD SOLH, ON 14 OCTOBER, ALSO PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE TWO POLITICAL FOES TO COME TOGETHER, THIS TIME TO BASH THE TURKS (RECALLING OTTOMAN HEGEMONY AND OPPRESSION OF LEBANESE PATRIOTS SUCH AS AL-SOLH). END COMMENT.)

17. (U) MP NASSIB LAHUD, AN UNDECLARED CONTENDER FOR THE PRESIDENCY, ARGUED FOR SIMPLY ABOLISHING THE PROBLEMATIC CLAUSES OF ARTICLE 49 RATHER THAN ADD A "ONE-TIME ONLY" PROVISION WHICH IN HIS VIEW WEAKENED THE CONSTITUTION. "BY AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION FOR ONE TIME ONLY AND EXCEPTIONALLY ON THE EVE OF EVERY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, IS A STATE OF LAW AND INSTITUTIONS BEING BUILT?" HE TOLD THE PRESS (A SENTIMENT OTHER POLITICIANS AND ANALYSTS HERE HAVE EXPRESSED TO US PRIVATELY.) HOWEVER, LAHUD, ESTRANGED COUSIN OF EMILE, SUBSEQUENTLY INDICATED HIS INTENTION TO VOTE FOR THE GENERAL.

ELECTION DAY ATMOSPHERICS: A GOOD TIME HAD BY ALL

18. (U) THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS WERE SUMMONED TO ATTEND THE ELECTORAL SESSION OF PARLIAMENT AT 1100 ON 15 OCTOBER. WITH ALL BUT TEN (MOSTLY ALLIES OF DRUZE LEADER AND MINISTER OF DISPLACED WALID JUMBLATT) OF THE 128 DEPUTIES IN THEIR SEATS, SPEAKER NABIH BERRI MADE THIS TRAIN RUN ON TIME. A SHOUT OF "WHY CAN'T WE JUST DECLARE THIS THING DONE" WAS MET BY MIXED LAUGHTER AND CRIES OF "GIVES US THE BALLOTS." AFTER COLLECTION OF THE SEALED UNMARKED ENVELOPES CONTAINING THE MPS' CHOICE, DEPUTY SPEAKER FERZLI OPENED EACH AND READ ALOUD (118 TIMES) THE NAME "EMILE LAHUD." THIS PROCESS ELICITED STILL MORE GALES OF LAUGHTER AND BANTERING ON THE FLOOR, WITH BERRI AT ONE POINT ORDERING FERZLI TO "SPEED IT UP." AT 11:25, EMILE LAHUD WAS DECLARED THE PRESIDENT-ELECT. AS THE DIPLOMATS AND DEPUTIES DECAMPED, FRENCH AMBASSADOR JOUANNEAU SUMMED UP THE PROCEEDINGS FOR THOSE PRESENT BY DRYLY NOTING "QUELLE SURPRISE."

HOPES FOR LAHUD

19. (C) WHILE MOST LEBANESE RESENT SYRIAN DIRECTION OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AND THE HASTY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT, THERE IS NEAR (AND TO US GENUINE) CONSENSUS SUPPORT FOR GENERAL LAHUD AS LEBANON'S NEXT PRESIDENT -- AND AS A CATALYST FOR MUCH-NEEDED CHANGE. THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS AND CAVEATS IN THIS SUPPORT, HOWEVER. JUMBLATT AND HIS DRUZE ALLIES REMAIN DEEPLY SUSPICIOUS OF THE MILITARY AND HIS RELATIONS WITH LAHUD CAN BE EXPECTED TO BE (AT BEST) PROBLEMATIC. WHILE MOST MARONITES SEE LAHUD AS AMONG THE BEST OF THE POSSIBLE CANDIDATES (THEIR HEARTS WERE WITH NASSIB LAHUD OR BUTROS HARB) AND FAR SUPERIOR TO THE LIKES OF JEAN OBEYD OR ELIE HOBEIQA, THERE IS A RESERVOIR OF

CONCERN THAT SYRIA WILL NOW DICTATE THE CHOICE OF LAHUD'S SUCCESSOR IN THE LAF AND WILL THUS HAVE BOTH THE PRESIDENT AND ARMY CHIEF BEHOLDEN TO THEIR WILL.

¶10. (C) ALTHOUGH FORMER PRESIDENT CHARLES HELOU TOLD THE AMBASSADOR ON 14 OCTOBER THAT HE VIEWED A LAHUD PRESIDENCY WITH GREAT OPTIMISM, MANY FROM HIS POLITICAL GENERATION RECALL THE REIGN OF PRESIDENT FOUAD SHEHAB (ALSO LAF COMMANDER BEFORE HIS ELECTION) WHOSE USE OF THE LAF G-2 TO MONITOR AND SHAPE POLITICAL DECISIONS WAS WIDELY RESENTED AND FEARED. DESPITE SUCH RESERVATIONS, FROM HIZBALLAH TO THE MARONITE LEAGUE, LAHUD HAS A WIDE BODY OF SUPPORT ACROSS CONFESSIONAL LINES AND AMONG THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. KEY LEADERS IN THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT, NOTABLY PM HARIRI, HAVE BEEN QUICK TO PLEDGE PUBLICLY THEIR DESIRE TO COOPERATE WITH THE NEW PRESIDENT.

ITS THE ECONOMY, STUPID (AND THE SOCIETY, AND POLITICS)

¶11. (C) THE UNANSWERED QUESTION HERE IS WHAT, PRECISELY, THE NEW PRESIDENT INTENDS TO DO WITH THIS SUPPORT. LEBANON FACES A VARIETY OF SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES: THE NEED FOR URGENT ECONOMIC REFORMS, AN ALMOST WHOLLY DISCREDITED AND CORRUPT SPOILS SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT AND CONTINUING DRIFT IN SEARCH OF A NEW, POST-CIVIL WAR IDENTITY AND SENSE OF NATIONHOOD. NOT ONE OF LEBANON'S MANY POLITICIANS, ECONOMISTS OR JOURNALISTS CLAIM TO KNOW WHAT IS IN LAHUD'S MIND OR WHETHER, IN FACT, HE HAS A PROGRAM FOR GOVERNANCE. THE ROLE AND AUTHORITY OF THE POST-TAIF PRESIDENT IS ITSELF AMBIGUOUS. UNLIKE THE PRIME MINISTER AND SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT, WHO HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED EXECUTIVE AND LEGISLATIVE POWERS AND PREROGATIVES, THE PRESIDENT -- BY THE TEXT OF THE CONSTITUTION -- PLAYS A LARGELY SYMBOLIC ROLE. PERSONAL CORRUPTION, LACK OF INTEREST AND LIMITED CREDIBILITY AS A NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL STATESMAN RENDERED CURRENT PRESIDENT HRAWI UNFIT OR UNABLE TO TAKE ON ANY LARGER, MORE EFFECTIVE RESPONSIBILITIES. MANY HERE ARGUE THAT LAHUD CAN INDEED ASSUME A SIGNIFICANT ROLE AS AN EXEMPLAR OF PERSONAL ETHICS IN GOVERNMENT AND, BUILDING ON HIS SUCCESS WITH THE LAF, IN REBUILDING AND REINFORCING THE INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT.

¶12. (C) ASSUMING THAT LAHUD DOES HAVE A CONCEPT OF WHAT HE WISHES TO DO AS PRESIDENT (THERE ARE SOME WHO ASSERT THAT LAHUD WANTS VERY MUCH TO BE PRESIDENT, BUT DOES NOT HAVE A CLEAR VISION OF WHAT HE WILL DO ONCE THERE), HE WILL FACE A FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE IN THE PERSON OF PM HARIRI -- WHO IS VIRTUALLY CERTAIN TO CONTINUE AS PRIME MINISTER -- TO ANY ATTEMPT TO ACT IN A MANNER WHICH HARIRI WILL VIEW AS THREATENING HIS OWN PREEMINENCE. FOR ALL HARIRI'S TALK OF SUPPORT FOR LAHUD AS "A STRONG PRESIDENT," THE CLEAR SUBTEXT IS "STRONG PRESIDENT, YES" BUT AS AN ASSET FOR HARIRI'S USE TO COUNTER SPEAKER BERRI. THE PM TOLD AMBASSADOR SHORTLY BEFORE THE ELECTION THAT "I HOPE LAHUD WILL BE AN ALLY. BUT IF HE THINKS HE CAN DICTATE TO ME ON HOW A NEW GOVERNMENT WILL BE FORMED OR TRIES TO BLOCK ME, I WILL CRUSH HIM."

¶13. (C) FOR HIS PART, BERRI WANTS A NEW GOVERNMENT COMPOSED OF PARLIAMENTARIANS. FORMER SPEAKER HUSSEIN HUSSEINI -- NO FRIEND OF BERRI BUT LOYAL TO THE PARLIAMENT AND ITS ROLE -- TOLD THE AMBASSADOR ON 14 OCTOBER THAT HE, TOO, FAVORED A GOVERNMENT OF DEPUTIES REPRESENTING ALL CONFESSIONS "IN THE SPIRIT OF TAIF." THIS IS IN CONTRAST, HUSSEINI SAID, TO THE KNOWN INTENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER TO CREATE A CABINET OF "TECHNOCRATS."

SYRIA: WHAT DOES ASAD WANT?

¶14. (C) EMBASSY DAMASCUS' EXCELLENT DISCUSSION (REFTEL) OF THE VARYING INTERPRETATIONS POSSIBLE FOR SELECTION OF LAHUD MATCHES OUR OWN (AND OUR INTERLOCUTORS) UNCERTAINTY WHETHER DAMASCUS SEES IN LAHUD A STABILIZING FORCE IN THE BEST SENSE (STRENGTHENED POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION) OR THE WORST (LAHUD AS YET ANOTHER PLAYER TO BE MANIPULATED IN ORDER TO PREVENT EMERGENCE OF ANY INDEPENDENT AND THUS THREATENING -- TO SYRIA -- LEBANESE POLITY). THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE LATTER, E.G. MINISTER HOBEIQA, STATE FLATLY THAT THE SYRIANS WILL CONTROL THE OVERALL PROCESS OF FORMING A NEW GOVERNMENT --

WHICH WILL MERELY BE A "RESHUFFLING" OF THE MINISTERIAL DOSSIERS RATHER THAN ANY FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN APPROACH TO GOVERNANCE IN LEBANON. HOBEIQA TOLD THE AMBASSADOR ON 9 OCTOBER THAT HE RECOGNIZED THAT "THINGS HAVE CHANGED IN SYRIA," BUT BELIEVED THAT IS PRECISELY WHY THE SYRIANS WANT A PRESIDENT LIKE LAHUD WHO HAS PROVEN HIMSELF PREDICTABLE, AND RELIABLE AS AN ALLY TO ASAD'S SON BASHAR IN DAYS TO COME. HOBEIQA (SPEAKING HERE FOR A WIDE SPECTRUM OF LEBANON'S POLITICAL CLASS) DID NOT THINK LAHUD HAD THE EXPERIENCE NEED TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE. "WHO MAKES CHANGE HERE?," HOBEIQA ASKED SARCASTICALLY. "I HOPE THE GENERAL IS A GOOD TACTICIAN. I AM SURE HE IS NOT. PEOPLE SAY HE IS A GOOD GENERAL. WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HE NEVER HAD TO FIGHT, AND HE WILL FACE TESTS AHEAD."

¶15. (C) MOST LEBANESE HOPE LAHUD'S LEADERSHIP WILL MARK AN END TO THE SQUABBLING, INEFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT OF THE "TROIKA" (I.E., THE PRESIDENT, PRIME MINISTER, AND SPEAKER). INDEED, REPORTS ARE CIRCULATING HERE THAT THE SYRIANS, PARTICULARLY ASAD HIMSELF, DO NOT WANT TO CONTINUE RECEIVING STREAMS OF LEBANESE VISITORS PLEADING THEIR CASES AND PROBLEMS IN DAMASCUS. LAHUD MAY WELL PUT AN END TO SOME OF THIS ACTIVITY (JUST AS HE FORBADE JUNIOR OFFICERS TO HAVE CONTACT WITH THE SYRIANS OUTSIDE OF LEBANON). BUT HERE AGAIN, THERE IS A DARKER READING OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS FROM SOME OF LEBANON'S MOST ASTUTE ANALYSTS, INCLUDING EDITORIALIST SARKIS NAOUM AND FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER FOUAD BUTROS. THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT BEYOND HIS PROVEN RECORD AS A DEPENDABLE PARTNER TO SYRIA AND AN ASSET FOR THE FUTURE, SYRIA CHOSE LAHUD BECAUSE HE REPRESENTED THE MOST POTENT COUNTERWEIGHT THAT COULD BE POSED AGAINST HARIRI -- WHOSE PERCEIVED INDEPENDENCE NEEDED A MORE EFFECTIVE BALANCE THAN HRAWI COULD PROVIDE. THEY ASSERT "LAHUD IS SEEN BY THE SYRIANS AS AN ANTI-HARIRI."

¶16. (C) COMMENT: WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR US? LAHUD REMAINS A POLITICAL ENIGMA AND SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN PERMITTING HIS ELECTION -- ALBEIT TO POPULAR ACCLAIM -- ARE EVEN HARDER TO READ. MUCH OF THE SKEPTICISM PREVALENT HERE IS WORTH TAKING ON BOARD, BUT LAHUD WILL STILL HAVE SOME TIME TO NAME A NEW GOVERNMENT AND ELABORATE HIS PROGRAM. WHETHER THIS WILL AMOUNT TO THE FORMATION OF A "THIRD REPUBLIC" CHARACTERIZED BY MORE EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT AND LESS VENAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, OR MORE OF THE SAME SORT OF TURF BATTLES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE TROIKA REMAINS TO BE SEEN. WE CLEARLY HAVE AN INTEREST IN THE FORMER. THE DEPARTMENT STATEMENT WELCOMING LAHUD'S ELECTION AND EXPRESSING OUR HOPE THAT GOOD GOVERNANCE AND STRENGTHENING OF INSTITUTIONS WILL MARK HIS TENURE MAKES THE RIGHT POINTS. WE WILL BE PRESSING THOSE SAME THEMES IN OUR OWN DIALOGUE WITH LAHUD AND IN OUR ONGOING DISCUSSIONS WITH HIS FUTURE COLLEAGUES BERRI AND HARIRI. END COMMENT

SATTERFIELD